

International Human Rights Day in Pittsburgh Stresses Racial and Economic Justice

On Wednesday December 10th Pittsburgh residents joined millions of people around the world in celebrating the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This anniversary is a special time to both honor those human rights defenders who have devoted their lives to help define and protect human rights and to inspire us to carry on their work. It is also a time to see where we continue to fall short, and where we are losing ground, in this struggle.

This year, people around the country are lifting their voices to show that “Black lives matter!” The Human Rights City Alliance organized a press conference at the Hill House Association’s Kaufmann Auditorium to draw attention to the many areas where we need to address glaring racial injustices that are at the basis of the police violence in the news today. The “Raging Grannies” helped set the stage for the event and warmed up the crowd for the calls to action that were to come.

Speakers were some of the leading human rights defenders working to advance racial justice in our city. These areas have been a major focus of the Human Rights City Alliance work, since a key lesson from history is that any work to lift up a community requires conscious attention to the particular needs of historically oppressed and marginalized groups.

Carmen Alexander from New Voices Pittsburgh pointed to the intersections of diverse human rights as they impact Black women and girls in particular. New Voices’s work on reproductive justice has demonstrated the many different aspects of economic and social policy that affect women’s and families’ lives. Carl Redwood, from the Hill District Consensus Group stressed the importance of our work to ensure access to affordable housing and for more community involvement in development decisions. Black residents are increasingly being squeezed out of the city’s housing market and this needs to be a priority area of work. Courtney Clemm, a high school student activist in the Pittsburgh Student Activist Coalition reported on the activities of young people and noted the importance of inter-generational work. Finally, workers told their story of their struggles to enjoy their rights to organize and to enjoy a safe and humane working environment.

Workers from the “Fight for Fifteen”-- Chris Ellis, Ashawna Osborn, and Lolene Germany spoke of the working conditions that are motivating growing numbers of fast food workers to strike for better pay and working conditions. And Brittany Swiger, a banquet server at Rivers Casino who is organizing with UNITE HERE discussed the abusive policies in that shop that have encouraged growing numbers of workers to demand the right to form a union. She reported that workers planned an action that very day to demand an end to harsh attendance policies. Their action proved successful as management agreed to more lenient terms. Closing the press conference were activists mobilizing for police accountability and racial justice. Activist and artist Phat Man Dee spoke briefly about the actions being organized and helped lead a round of feisty human rights caroling with songs written by local human rights leaders.

The Human Rights City Alliance also released its [Human Rights City Action Plan](#) which identifies concrete changes needed to make Pittsburgh a true Human Rights City. Members of the group delivered the Action Plan to the Mayor and City Council members later that day, and organizers will be

using the document to help mobilize and coordinate human rights activism in the city. The Human Rights City Alliance is working to unite groups around our city and region to strengthen our demands for dignity and justice for everyone. We know that we cannot wait for changes in national policy, but we need to become a living example to show that a society based on human rights is possible.

The Human Rights Day event was part of more than two weeks of Human Rights Days of Action promoted by the Alliance. In addition to a number of direct actions, educational events, and an Amnesty International write-a-thon, Pittsburgh activists convinced our [City Council to pass a Will of Council recognizing October 12th as Indigenous Peoples Day](#). Stay tuned as more work happens to confront the human rights atrocities of our past and to reform school curricula to end the celebratory treatment of Columbus's encounter with Turtle Island.

For details about the Human Rights City Alliance and the Action Plan, see www.pghrights.org